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ABSTRACT

An exploratory multiple-case study examined West Virginia students', parents', and educators' perceptions of participation by secondary students and recent school leavers with mild intellectual disabilities in the Individual Transition/Education Planning (ITEP) process. Data collection consisted of individual interviews with 24 students and graduates (aged 14-24); focus groups with 60 students, graduates, parents, educators, and counselors in 5 West Virginia counties; and review of 15 ITEP documents. Major findings included the following: (1) except in the most remote county, students could identify agencies and resources to help them with career development; (2) students were informally prepared for ITEP meetings by educators, but no systematic training for self-determination was taking place; (3) there was general agreement about inadequate time and schoolwide support for transition planning; (4) some students had difficulties communicating about future plans, in general or with their parents; (5) collaboration among educators was good but county-wide transition coordinators were needed; and (6) parents had lower expectations of student outcomes than did educators, and conceptualizations of the meaning of self-determination varied widely. Implications are discussed for further research, special education policy in West Virginia, parent-teacher communication, and improvements in transition practices. Contains 42 references. (SV)

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HOW ARE STUDENTS WITH MILD INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES INVOLVED IN PLANNING THEIR OWN TRANSITIONS?

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(Abstract)

This exploratory, comparative, multiple-case study combined qualitative and quantitative data analysis to compare students', parents', and educators' perceptions of how secondary students and recent school leavers (ages 14-24), with mild intellectual disabilities, participated in their own Individual Transition/Education Planning (ITEP) process. Three components comprised the project, (1) focus groups, (2) individual interviews, and (3) review of ITEP documents.

Self-determination encompasses a person's right and ability to exercise control over her or his own destiny and involves both attitudes and capabilities that lead to individual goal setting and initiative to reach for those goals. Developing self-determination capabilities is a life long process that requires a great deal of understanding from parents and educators, so that they do not foster over-dependence.

Self-determination has been defined as "acting as the primary causal agent in one's life and making choices and decisions regarding one's quality of life free from undue external influence or interference" (Wehmeyer, 1992, 1996, p.22). "People with disabilities lack the opportunity to experience control and choice in their lives, and their lives would be more fulfilling and satisfying if this were not the case" (Wehmeyer, 1995, p. 38).

More than 300,000 known self-advocates are asserting that "self-determination is fundamental to being a person, even if it means different things to different people" (Michael Kennedy, 1996, p. 38).

The current educational emphasis on self-determination evolved from the principle of Normalization (Nirje, 1972), which represented a change in public awareness and thinking about people with disabilities and gave rise to the paradigm shift that led to the enactment of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 and its subsequent amendments of 1997, hereafter referred to as IDEA; the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, hereafter referred to as ADA, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, as amended in 1992 (Kiernan & Schalock, 1997).

In 1984, Madeline Will, then Assistant Secretary of Education in charge of the United States Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), made an urgent plea for improving outcomes for students with disabilities. Secondary special education was then focused on skill-based training for independence (Brolin, 1995). Students served in special education, vocational education, and work study programs were generally not achieving positive post school outcomes. Many were dropping out of school before graduation (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996).

It has been roughly ten years between the time that Madeline Will expressed those concerns and President Clinton's signing of the new Schools to Work Opportunities Act of 1994, a landmark bill prioritizing transition for every young person. During that decade, Andrew Halpern (1985) refocused

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transition concerns on the whole person by introducing his expanded model of transition, in which components other than employment were recognized. In the same decade, self-advocacy networks increased concern that civil rights of individuals with disabilities are being violated regarding equal treatment and access. Since the mid 1980s, the fields of education and human services have shifted away from labeling and placing groups of people in established programs, toward assessing the level of supports needed for individual persons to function as valued members of the community and away from providing sheltered work activities toward developing real jobs in integrated work settings.

Barriers affecting changes in the provision of service include traditional program-based funding streams and mechanisms, lack of professional and community awareness training, community attitudes, lack of accessibility and transportation, and exclusive treatment of individuals who are considered different (Abery & Stancliffe, 1996). For this reason, individualized, participatory planning requires considerable collaborative efforts. Students who have mild disabilities can participate in consensual decision-making and benefit from what West and Idol (1990) called, "mutual empowerment," afforded by functioning as a team member with parity (see also Gajar, Goodman, & McAfee, 1993).

The literature supports self-determination as a necessary educational outcome because it facilitates successful programming, develops life long strategies and skills, and assists in the prevention of depression (Fields, 1996). Schloss, Alper, & Jayne (1993) presented a model for enhancing individual choice. Several curricular and instructional programming guides have been developed over the past decade such as I-PLAN (Van Reusen & Bos, 1990) and Choice Maker (Martin & Marshall, 1995; see also Hoffman & Fields, 1995).

Enabling students to play a key role in their Individual Transition/Education Plan is important to their attaining optimal outcomes for a number of reasons. First, students who choose their own activities are more motivated to complete them (Van Reusen & Bos, 1994). Second, opportunities to express preferences lead to more openness or willingness to communicate between students and other stakeholders in the educational process, which in turn leads to more individualized educational outcomes (Martin & Marshall, 1995). Third, best practices in the field of transition focus on student participation in the planning process (Agran, 1997). If transition services are to prepare students with disabilities for adult living, then there is need to improve their participation in planning and decision-making in the process that determines their future circumstances (Martin, Marshall, & Maxson, 1993). IDEA requires that transition be characterized by a coordinated set of activities and services based on individual student's needs, taking into account the student's preferences and interests [IDEA, Section 602 (a)(19)]. The individual transition plan must, by regulation, include a statement of the student regarding their long term desires for adult outcomes (Pierangelo & Crane, 1997).

The literature also indicates that students and teachers agree that self-determination is a valuable educational outcome. Johnson, Sharpe, Sinclair, Hasazi, Furney, & Destefano (1997) studied the degree to which school districts were implementing the transition mandates. Briefly, what they found was that most teachers (82%) invite students to participate in their ITEP meetings, and that (89%) of participating teachers prepared students for participation in their planning by talking with them informally about their goals.

Wehmeyer & Schwarts (1998) studied transition goals and objectives of 136 students with intellectual and other types of developmental disabilities in one urban and one rural setting. They looked for goals, objectives, or described actions across all IDEA categories that could lead to outcomes in any of the component elements of self-determination established by The Arc of the United States (Wehmeyer, 1995). Out of 895 goals reviewed, only 32 were found to address self-determination

component skills. Thirty goals addressed choice-making and two addressed decision-making. These findings suggest that students are not receiving individualized instruction in necessary skill clusters to enable them to become self-determining men and women (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). Wehmeyer (1995) concluded that professionals and community persons need to set expectations of people with developmental disabilities higher and perceive them to be contributing members of society worthy of respect and dignified treatment. That treatment includes providing appropriate instruction and opportunities to participate fully in their own life.

Methods

Setting

West Virginia is considered an impoverished, mountainous, rural state. It's school districts are county-wide. The three main urban centers are geophysically separated. The overall employment to population ratio is 50, the lowest in the nation, and over half of West Virginia's children live below the federal poverty line. One out of every 62 seventh through twelfth graders drops out of school. One fourth of all births are to mothers with less than a twelfth grade education. One out of every 10 babies are born to unwed, teenage parents. One out of every 270 children suffers from neglect or abuse (West Virginia Kids Count Data Book, 5th Edition, 1996). In 1990, the population ratio of Black to Caucasian individuals is 3.3%, and the ratio of Black individuals to total state population was approximately 3.4%. The 1990 reported percentage of Native American population for the whole state is approximately 1.4% (McGrath Libbey & Price Reinke, 1995-96).

Participants

The researcher used purposeful selection. Sixty individuals from five counties, two urban and three rural, across northern West Virginia participated in the study. Following is a profile of participants: 22 students (37%), 4 graduates (6%), 18 parents (30%), 14 educators (24%), 2 counselors (3%).

Design

Research Questions. Over-arching Questions were grouped as follows: A. What meaning is attached to the ITEP process? B. How are students participating in the ITEP process? C How do participants view self-determination?

Secondary Comparative Research Questions were grouped as follows: A. Are there thematic differences among cases in relation to the three areas of primary research focus? B. Does the data validate the anticipation expressed in the field that younger students should feel better supported (than graduates) by more highly developed transition systems? C) Are gender differences reported in the literature evident in these findings? D) Are there within case differences between perceptions of urban and rural participants?

Document Review Review Questions were grouped as follows: A) How do ITEP documents reviewed reflect what the participants are saying about the process? B) Do the ITEP documents reviewed address self-determination needs of individual students with mild intellectual disabilities by including goals, objectives, or actions designed to promote self-determination? C) Are the students' or recent graduates' interests and concerns reflected the ITEP documents? D) How well do the ITEP documents reflect the participation of the individual student in the planning process? E) Do the ITEP documents reviewed indicate any systemic issues or barriers to development of self-determination by students with mild intellectual disabilities?

Procedures

Data Collection. Individual interviews with 20 students and 4 graduates (ages 14 through 24) were conducted prior to initiating the focus groups so that information that may be heard in a group

would not bias their responding during interviews. Next, The researcher moderated eight focus group sessions over a four month period in four counties, six in urban areas and two in rural areas, across the State of West Virginia. Interviews were audio-recorded and focus groups were video-recorded. ITEP document reviews provided an additional mode of gathering data about the perceptions of key stakeholders in the ITEP process.

Data Analyses. Interpretive and comparative methods were used to analyze emergent constructs, themes and relationship (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). The following approaches to analysis were utilized: (1) Interpretive analysis resulted in an overall impressions of the data gained through reviewing tape recordings, reading summary notes of interview sessions, and reviewing documents; (2) Constant comparative analysis refers to the spiraling interplay of inductive and deductive processes used to build constructs and check data for fit. Forty-nine initial themes were identified within and among cases and coded through tagging, sorting, and merging procedures enhanced by the use of HyperQua!2. These coded themes were then reorganized as sub-categories of the following five thematic areas: Awareness, Teaming, Planning Self-determination, and Emergent Needs and Concerns. All sub-categories were verified through member checking. Subcategorical themes were charted as to actual numbers of participants generating related data chunks, and percentages were obtained for each case perspective. A prediction profile was run in JMP version 3 to screen cases for effect size of certain sub-categories. (3) Case comparative analysis matrices revealed commonality and uniqueness across cases; (4) Cluster analysis explored the configurations of sub-category groups. (5) Case-oriented quantification allowed the researcher to explore relationships within thematic categories by applying the appropriate statistical operations (Ragin, 1995). Bivariate cross-tabulation with Chi Square analysis was used to visualize data and indicate where original context warranted further investigation. Cluster analysis indicated common features among cases. Multi-vocality within-case was verified in member-checking. Non-parametric correlations offered indication of case alignment and of relationships among sub-categorical themes. Analysis was on-going and additive (Miles and Huberman,1994).

Triangulation. Member-checking was used to determine within-case splits. Emergent data were then triangulated with information from 29 interviews 15 ITEP documents. Case-oriented quantification provided additional verification of emergent data.

Results

Overview of Findings

Awareness. Parents perceived students learn better by doing real things in real places (outside school). Graduates felt that working in the community is the best support for increasing student awareness. Students felt they know their own strengths and needs. Graduates confirmed educators' assertions that students hear both their strengths and their needs from educators. Students and educators are aligned on the importance of fitness and exercise. Students and educators (except in the most remote site) were aligned on the notion that there were a lot of job opportunities and things to do in their counties.

Teaming. Students generally felt supported by other members of their planning teams. Parents perceived that students felt supported by other planning team members, and that counselors help plan, however, they recognized that some teachers do not care about individual student plans. Students felt that collaboration among their educators is good. Students concur with parents that, generally, parents are the dominant decision-makers. Educators and students consider student input very important. Parents were split on this notion. Educators and students concur that they can make the process happen. Students and educators concur that students perceive their career planning to be very important. Educators responded above the mean on the notion that students are prepared informally for their roles in planning, and that

getting the person in the right place with the right supports is the key to successful transition. Some educators and graduates concurred that there are great community supports and role models.

Planning. Educators, parents, and students perceive that there is not enough time for planning. Some students were looking beyond traditional entry level jobs, to further their education in business, art, or child care. Graduates talk with their parents about their futures, although this presents difficulties for some. Rural vocational educators felt that girls are more attentive to planning than boys. Note: This was not verified in member-checking.

Self-determination. Educators and parents responded above the mean on the notion of self-determination depending on awareness and functionality of students. However, educators interjected the notion that self-determination depends on individual and environmental factors. Parents and educators responded above the mean on community exposure being the key to self-determination, and that communication is more difficult for students with moderate intellectual disabilities. Educators felt that self-determination is not taught directly, but rather it is integrated into all classes. Counselors do not agree. Graduates all felt that students need assertiveness and communication skills. Students perceived that coordinated transition efforts increase their self-determination capabilities. Parents and educators verified that students felt they have some choice but are required to take block courses. All of the above information is consistent with hierarchical cluster means.

Triangulation

ITEP document review. All 15 ITEP documents reviewed had been signed by the student to whom the plan pertained. None maintained a space for recording specific student input. In three student's cases, no objectives were specifically written to take into consideration the students' expressed desires for the future. Transition planning sections of the documents in all counties were particularly brief attachments to the main planning document. Generally they named services to be provided and persons responsible to see that the services were carried out. All but three documents emphasized self-regulation and self-management skills, such as self-checks for grooming and appropriate dress, with some goals and fewer objectives for problem-solving. One third of the plans reviewed stated goals for self-advocacy but specified no objectives for developing advocacy and leadership skills, for goal setting and attainment, or for risk taking and safety.

Member-checking. Parents were split on the notion that coordinated transition efforts and students working in the community increase student awareness. Some parents believe that students do not know their own strengths and needs, such as the need to stay fit and healthy. Student responses were not split. Student responses were the most variable, however, their responses to member-checking were the most stable. An interesting split occurred between participating counselors and teachers. Educators and parents were split on the notion that students hear both strengths and needs from teachers and that self-determination is taught in all classes. Rural and urban educators do not agree that parents are the dominant decision-makers. Educators do not all agree that there are great community supports and role models. The high negative correlation between doing things in real places and job opportunities within-county is that, in reality, job opportunities are better in urban areas. Transportation is much more accessible in urban areas.

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

Awareness of Self and Resources. Except in the most remote county involved in the study, students could identify agencies and resource available to help them develop their careers. This was not the situation for students that had to be bussed long distances and remain all day at school. Special

educators in that district wrote grants so students could look up transition information on the Internet. It is well documented in the literature that students with disabilities hold the same values but lower expectations than do peers without disabilities (Fisher & Harnisch, 1992). Students in this remote county anticipate low paying careers. To illustrate, one male student from that remote county complained, "If I'm going to be a blue collar worker all my life, why do I need to know about classification of the animal and plant kingdoms?"

Urban educators recognized that parent expectations of their sons' and daughters' capabilities had to change, but in many cases, they don't hold out much hope for that to happen. Rural educators still struggle to involve parents in meaningful planning.

Informal Preparation of Students for Self-determining Roles. For the most part, students attend their planning meetings. For whatever reason, a few did not attend by parent choice. All participating educators reported that they encourage and prepare students to attend and speak up informally. This does not necessarily mean students were poorly prepared, but there was no evidence that any uniform or systematic training was taking place that would increase their ability to exercise choice, make planning decisions, or communicate with other team members about their plans. Educators' assertions that self-determination is integrated into all classes was not verified on member-checking. Younger students interviewed were describing more self-advocacy for needed accommodations.

Meaning of the ITEP Process. Parents and educators do not believe that students attach much meaning to the ITEP process until they are seniors. Students and graduates could tell you what would happen if you don't plan. "If you don't plan, you could make a big mistake and get blocked into the wrong courses."

Time and Support for the ITEP Process. Across all cases and counties it was reported that there was not adequate time or school-wide supports for planning. Educators reported having to do a lot of work at home, on the phone, or from their cars. Much of the burden of implementing and coordinating the mandates of IDEA and ADA fall on the special educators. Special educators reported spending a lot of time ensuring that collaboration with other team members occurred in order to get the job done. Both rural and urban educators receive a lot of empathy from parents who express concern that educators are overloaded. One rural mother said, "Teachers can be involved in a meeting, and when the bell rings, they have to jump up and run." "An urban father said, "Teachers are doing a great job at coordinating all they have to, but they need a lot of help."

Issues in Teaming and Communication. One graduate and several students indicated difficulty talking with their parents about future plans, and for some talking about planning in itself is difficult. Educators and parents agree that students with more involved disabilities have a harder time communicating. Sixty two percent of students interviewed indicated that team members listen to their worries and wishes about the future, but not all their teachers.

Collaboration among regular educators, special educators, and vocational educators was reported to be good by urban and rural special educators, students, and graduates, but not by vocational educators. They noted differences with special educator over how students should be accommodated for assignments and test-taking. They also noted the need for a county-wide transition coordinator. This finding was verified across cases and counties. One urban parent said, "Teachers don't have the training they need to implement inclusion, let alone the collaboration that it takes to implement and coordinate transition and self-determination."

Parents and educators are not communicating well about the behavioral and social emotional needs of the students. A rural mother who is otherwise very supportive of her daughter's transitions said, "They ought to go back to paddling students. They would get more out of these kids, and the students would listen to them."

Perceptions of Self-determination. All cases, educators more than parents, believe that coordinated transition efforts and working in the community are the best supports for the development of students' self-determination. Parents generally hold lower expectations of student outcomes than do educators. Conceptualization of the meaning of self-determination was different from case to case. Fifty four percent of students expressed need for help with goal-setting. One rural student said, "I have time, but it is hard to plan." Roughly 37.5% of students interviewed felt they needed help with math skills. Several students complained that they had no art experience in school. Parents seemed more in tune with self-determination component skills that were educators. They identified self-management, self-confidence, risk-taking, assertiveness, self-advocacy, and a willingness to try. Educators identified assertiveness, social skills, self-grooming, safety, and mobility skill areas.

Limitations

The major limitation affecting this study was the unbalanced participation of parents. Two fathers and one step-father from urban counties participated. Fifteen parent participants were mothers. The effect on the project of this absence of input from fathers was that the role of fathers in the ITEP process remains unclear and less well understood than the role of mothers.Rural parents were more difficult to recruit and engage than were urban parents. Only four rural parents participated, and these were all mothers. This phenomenon may be typical of parents who have sons and daughters with disabilities in West Virginia schools. Participation of graduates was also unbalanced. Only four urban graduates. The unbalanced participation of parents and graduates could have affected the project's ability to reach theoretical saturation (exhaustion of responses) for those affected cases. For this reason, the team worked very hard to maximize the participation of all interviewees and focus group members. Guidelines were followed to enhance and support their responding. In spite of these imbalances in participation, the research team thought that a good mix of parent perceptions was attained from the study because the overall array of parent participation was rich in family relationships, mothers, fathers, step father, grandmother, and two parents who also served as legal guardians. In addition, one urban family brought racial diversity to the study.

Implications

Implications For Research. In the Fall of 1996, this researcher wrote a modest proposal to OSERS requesting funding to take The Arc Self-determination Scale (Wehmeyer, 1995) into West Virginia public secondary schools and administer it to students with mild intellectual disabilities, age 18 through 21. Although that proposal was not funded, the idea of attaining self-report measures of students' self-determining behaviors is still viable. Implementing that research would also provide a vehicle for educators to assess student needs and starting points for systematic instruction in the components of self-determination. Ianacone & Kochhar (1996) made a concerted plea for deeper understandings and for striking a deeper dialogue related to how youth development should be fostered. A research question that emerged from the limitations of this study is, "What is the role of fathers in futures planning for students with mild intellectual disabilities?" It would be helpful to study family dynamics around the issues of transition and self-determination. Study along this avenue may shed light on why it appears so difficult to involve rural parents in the ITEP process.

Implications for Policy. West Virginia Department of Special Education needs to address the transition planning form at the state level and work its prototype into a usable format for Local Education

Agencies (LEAs) to enhance the planning roles of students and other team members. Closer monitoring of the implementation of IDEA, both at the national and the state levels could assist LEAs to properly implement the spirit and the mandates of IDEA. There are still situations in which parents opt not to allow students with mild intellectual disabilities to attend their ITEP meetings. A strand for educating preservice teachers in ways to promote self-determination for students with disabilities could be woven into the special education programs of University Department sof through committees on diversity.

Implications for Practice. Special educators need to communicate with parents and families to help them envision a career path for their sons and daughters, thereby raising the general expectations that their sons or daughters can, with their support, develop meaningful careers. Parents and educators need to communicate openly to identify problems and work out practical solutions prior to the ITEP meetings, so that during the meeting, the climate remains conducive to maximize the input of all team members. Because some families have communication difficulties due to social problems and poverty, educators need to find ways to reach them and make their participation in the process meaningful. Educators need coordinative assistance to implement inclusion, transition, and self-determination while simultaneously faced with school reforms. Students are asking for assistance in learning to set goals and work toward them. They deserve the full attention of their planning teams. Educator/mentors need adequate time and school-wide supports to implement the mandates of IDEA (inclusion and transition) and promote the development of self-determination by students with disabilities. The idea that self-determination capabilities are tied to functionality no longer holds. All students with intellectual disabilities need systematic instruction (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). Students with mild intellectual disabilities can have just as much difficulty communicating as students evaluated to be functioning within the moderate range. The next step in the development of self-determination is to further refine the definition of components of self-determining behaviors and to refine methods and materials to facilitate their formal instruction (Ruth Katz in personal communication, October, 1998).

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